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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CONCEPT OF EMPATHY.

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THIS PAPER DISCUSSES EMPATHY AS THE CONCEPT HAS DEVELOPED PHILOSOPHICALLY, AS IT IS USED IN THE ARTS, AND AS IT DIFFERS FROM SYMPATHY. EMPATHY IS DEFINED AS A TWO-DIRECTIONAL PROCESS INVOLVING THE OBSERVER AND THE OBSERVED. THE ETHICAL CONCEPT IS DEFINED AS AN EMOTIONAL "FEELING INTO," EXTENSION, OR INVESTMENT OF THE SELF ON THE PART OF THE OBSERVER (COUNSELOR). THE AESTHETIC CONCEPT INCLUDES AWARENESS OF A SHARED RELATIONSHIP, A RECIPROCITY OF EMOTIONS BETWEEN COUNSELEE AND COUNSELOR. EMOTIONAL INTERACTION DIFFERENTIATES EMPATHY FROM SYMPATHY. IN EMPATHY, THE COUNSELOR'S EMOTIONAL ASSOCIATION IS IN TERMS OF THE CLIENT'S FRAME OF REFERENCE. IN SYMPATHY, IT IS IN TERMS OF HIS OWN FRAME OF REFERENCE. EVIDENCE OF THE WILLINGNESS OF YOUNGSTERS TO ENTER AN EMPATHIC RELATIONSHIP IS PRESENTED. THE STUDENT COUNSELOR IS ENCOURAGED TO EXPAND HIS AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES AND TO BE MORE AWARE OF EVERYDAY EMPATHIC ASSOCIATIONS AS HE DEVELOPS A CONCEPT OF EMPATHY. THIS DOCUMENT APPEARS IN PERSPECTIVES ON COUNSELING, VOLUME 1, NO. 1, SPRING, 1966 PP. 26-35. (NS)

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FOREWORD

There exists a tendency to value only the writings of established experts as having relevance and meaning in our professional world. This is unfortunate, since the person involved in the educational process of becoming a counselor often possesses a refreshing perspective on some of the fundamental issues surrounding the art and science of counseling.

It is the purpose of this occasional journal to share and give exposition to some of these significant writings so that their value will not be lost in the musty files of the ivory tower.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CONCEPT OF EMPATHY

by
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Empathy is a term designating a concept of considerable magnitude. It would appear that of the major difficulties confronting a student counselor in developing an understanding of the concept is the limited presentation usually found in counseling texts. Most texts limit the discussion of empathy to that aspect directly involved in a counseling relationship which is quite theoretical and rather difficult to grasp. Arbuckle, for example, prefaces a discussion of what empathy accomplishes with the nature of the empathic association:

> The empathic relationship is achieved when the counselor is able to work with the client within the client's frame of reference, within the client's reality, and is able to communicate this understanding and acceptance to the client.[1]

It is not difficult for the student counselor to read this material and to give intellectual recognition to what it says; it is, however, quite difficult to be emotionally sensitive to the concept it presents, thus reinforcing it and making it a part of the counselor's method.

The intention of this paper is to present a more complete discussion of empathy, its history and differentiation from sympathy, in the belief that an understanding of other aspects of the empathy concept will make meaningful that which is employed in the counseling relationship. Essentially, it is an attempt to discover the <u>part</u> by discussing the <u>whole</u>.

History

Theodore Lipps, a German philosopher, in a study of optical illusion first presented a theory of Einfuehlung at the end of the nineteenth century. His efforts "...led him to the conclusion that the observing subject tends to project himself into the pattern."[2] Lipps later developed the thinking that extended the principle to feeling into and with another person. This was translated as empathy.

Buchheimer presented a refinement of empathy as a two-directional process involving the observer and the observed. These directions are termed the ethical concept and the aesthetic concept. Of the ethical concept he says:

> If man can put himself in another man's place as if it were himself, then man will not harm man for he will have compassion and good will.[3]

And of the aesthetic concept,

> "...the observer...allows the other...to project into him."[4]

Although the tendency might be at this point to say the ethical concept will be the only one involved in the counseling relationship, Buchheimer states that both are involved:

> In these two conceptions we see the basic difference in the approach to empathy as well as the reciprocity that is inherent in the empathic process.[5]

Empathy has been very much a part of aesthetic associations. As Lipps observed, "A man tends to feel himself into the material of visual art."[6] Dolman in writing of the theater presents "The Principle of Empathy" and discusses the same concept of feeling into something observed. He writes of motor empathy and the tendency of an observer to be imitative; however, in this very discussion can be seen not only motor imitation but also an emotional extension of the self:

> In contemplating an object of interest we commonly assume an imitative attitude toward it, feeling out the lines of the object in our own bodies. Thus when we behold the ocean or the mountains we involuntarily throw back our shoulders and expand our lungs, seeming to feel in ourselves the vastness and grandeur of the scene. When we watch a ballet dancer in motion we follow vicariously her every movement, feeling the grace and lightness as if it were our own. When we listen to music we instinctively seek out the rhythm and follow it with bodily pulsations of some sort, even beating time with feet or hands. And when we see a human being in a perilous or painful situation-a steeplejack in danger of falling from a high building, for instance--we experience much of the sensation of pain or danger in ourselves. When the stimuli are strong and the restraints weak we show these imitative responses in visible action; more often we feel and conceal them; and more often still we experience them only as motor sets, or patterns, and are not even consicious of their nature.[7]

Dolman is, of course, writing of the experience of the theater and the tendency to observe and imitate, but can this be part of the counseling in process? The theater assumes the obligation of drawing its audience into an empathic relationship through the use of setting, lighting, and histrionic talents, whereas the counselor assumes this obligation, without the mystical trappings of the theater, to move onto the stage of his client's life to be with him, to share and react, to shorten the aesthetic distance between the two. In the counseling relationship, then, the <u>ethical concept</u> is the obligation of the counselor.

Torrance, in his discussion of counseling creative talent, makes a similir distinction of the two-directional process and terms one <u>genuine empathy</u> (the ethical concept) and the other <u>identification</u> (the aesthetic concept).[8] <u>Identification</u> he describes as the capacity of one individual (the teacher or counselor) to cause another (the student or counselee) to feel that the counselee is like the counselor and should, therefore, behave as the counselor would behave.

This is a bit more than Buchhiemer's aesthetic concept, for in this instance the counselor not only allows the other to project into him, but he actually fosters and strives toward this end. As Torrance phrases it,

> In using the strategy of identification, the counselor tries to make his client see that they are really alike and that the client should help the counselor by going to college, making good grades, deciding to be a scientist, or whatever behavior the guidance counselor is trying to influence.[9]

This, of course, may be an inaccurate use of the process, but is, in fact, a form of empathy. It is not lasting because of the artificiality required of the client. Torrance strongly cautions counselors concerning the use of identification because of its interference with the independent thought of the client. He presents a more desirable genuine empathy in which:

> ...the teacher or counselor will try to view things from the internal frame of reference of the student...as... the basis for helping the individual meet the requirements of the situation, whatever it is, as something that he is doing for himself rather than something he is doing to accommodate the teacher or counselor.[10]

Fullmer and Bernard resolve the problem of direction presented by Torrance by advancing an additional concept of subjective investment. They find this concept to be "...useful in differentiating the empathic process from the processes of projection, identification, and assumption of similarity."[11] They developed the subjective aspect of the term, believing it more realistic and necessary in interpersonal relations to become involved because remaining objective implies an element of denial that will hinder the counseling relationship. They use investment because the counselor does, in fact, invest himself in the relationship. They point up, also,

that the greater the investment, the greater the return. These writers do, however, in addition to this discussion of the ethical concept of empathy, discuss the reciprocity Buchheimer mentions, as they make apparent the counselor's need to be aware of the aesthetic concept:

> Unless the adult cuts off or blocks youngsters' communication, they will easily move to invest in the interpersonal relationship with teacher or counselor.[12]

Limitations of Empathy

In the 1950's, empathy received considerable attention as a near panacea for the correction of interpersonal ills in all phases of life--in clinical work, social work, and business; even the differences caused by sectional tensions within the geography of this country. Empathy was seen as "...basic to all communicative processes,"[13] and thus fundamental in the development of self and operant in all areas of activity. It has, however, been particularly difficult to evaluate the process of empathy because it is, at one and the same time, as much a part of the emotions as of the intellect.

In spite of the capacities ascribed to it, empathy will have limitations in the counseling process as well as other areas. Dolman pointed out in his discussion the impossibility of exact imitation, and it is readily recognized that the counselor cannot be the client, nor is it necessary or desirable. In discussing the empathic process, Buchheimer says,

> ...the counselor does not need to enact or re-enact the client's feelings, expressions or words. He offers an abstraction of these;[14]

and

> The counselor's task, if he behaves empathically, is to integrate the client's response and offer it as an inte-

> grated abstraction to the client who then can integrate it for himself and continue to offer stimuli to the respondent counselor.[15]

The counselor engaged in the empathic process cannot, and need not, be that with which he is associating or striving toward--that is the limitation; however, it is from the intensity of that striving that his sense of the other being evolves. This again reflects the obligation of the counselor to assume the ethical concept and to make himself available to the client in the sense of the aesthetic concept.

Empathy and Sympathy

Buchheimer discusses a differentiation between empathy and sympathy and presents the German term for sympathy to contrast Lipps' Einfuehlung or empathy. The expression Mitfuehlung, meaning to feel along with, is sympathy as opposed to Einfuehlung, a feeling into. He states:

> A sympathetic person feels along with another person but not necessarily into another person. A sympathetic person does not need to interact with another person.[16]

Fullmer and Bernard feel a differentiation between the two is of considerable importance and express this thought rather strongly:

> Sympathy consists of feeling, with little or no understanding of the meaning behind behavior. If the counselor becomes sympathetic in this sense, he loses his effectiveness because he becomes a bundle of conflicting emotions instead of remaining an organized structure and process.[17]

The major distinction, it would appear, is in the frame of reference. In empathy, the counselor's emotional association and experience is in terms of the client's frame of reference; in sympathy, the association and experience is in the counselor's frame

of reference. Perhaps an analogy might assist in the explanation: in empathic association the counselor goes into his client's home to share his feelings and experiences with him; whereas, in sympathetic association, the counselor stays at home and uses his own experiences <u>there</u> as the basis for an emotional association with and understanding of what is occurring next door.

<u>Some Observations</u>

As Fullmer and Bernard indicated the willingness of youngsters to move easily into an interpersonal relationship, Dolman offered evidence of this insofar as motor empathy is concerned:

> If a man with a very peculiar walk passes a group of children at play they are very likely to fall in behind and follow him, imitating his walk and exaggerating it... But we do not always recognize the fact that older people feel the impulse just as strongly as children, and that they suppress it only because civilization has taught them to do so.[18]

There is hardly an adult who cannot recognize this or recall that part of his childhood that was imitative play or motion, and who has not observed what Dolman describes. We can hypothesize as to the capacity of a child to relate to and detect deception or emotion in an adult (which we frequently observe, but are at a loss to explain); or to learn and internalize fear, love, prejudice, or anxiety because of his empathic associations with others.

That we all experience motor empathy is readily apparent and is taken advantage of by some. A circus wire walker in a display of his skill frequently engages his audience at the beginning of his act by a near loss of balance, a near fall, or similar ploys. Many magicians perform a deception involving a kind of guillotine with which they first slice an object in two and then place a volunteer's

arm in position for the same apparent fate. The observer, having "felt" the sharpness of the blade in the first display, virtually experiences the sensation of cutting as he relates to the volunteer in the second.

While many similar observations can be made, there is a final one that perhaps goes beyond the others in demonstrating the nature and depth of empathic relationship. A sculptor studies the individual to be his subject in a variety of ways: he engages him as a personality, he makes a number of preliminary sketches, he reaches in to experience what this being is--and then this experience pours forth from the artist's hand to become a fully dimensional, concrete representation of the empathic relationship. An internationally recognized artist who was doing some demonstration sketching of a student, prior to the sculpting of a clay likeness, was heard to comment, "Now, isn't that him?" As an afterthought, he added, "And it looks like him, too." More than the subject's features, his being is present in the sensitive sculptor's work.

Summary

The student counselor might best develop the concept of empathy if he has a series of experiences of an aesthetic character in art forms and is made aware of the everyday empathic associations that are part of living. As Dolman mentioned, expanding ourselves in imitation of the majesty of an outdoor scene or feeling out the lines of a design or feeling oneself into modern art forms are all part of the process. A helpful experience is sensing the shortening of aesthetic distance as one views a play or film and moves into the

frame of reference of the actor to experience what the actor experiences; his fears, pain, delight, anguish.

Through the exercises discussed, the individual expands his horizons and capacity for association, but most of all, he must have interpersonal experiences wherein he is conscious of the processes and interactions. The counselor must himself have the opportunity for emotional growth and for extending himself beyond his own limited feelings.

Just as sympathy is limited to the counselor's frame of reference, attempts to develop insights into the process of counseling are limited if the counselor "stays at home." He is most in need of experiences to grow, and these will be found outside the area of formal education for counseling as well as within. Lindgren indicates this when he says:

> Empathy is improved through the normal processes of emotional growth and not through learning techniques or by practicing the tone of voice that conveys the most warmth.[19]

Evariff, in the foreword to his book, says that this type of empathetic development is essential in the emergence of the professional counselor:

> In recent years the emphasis in studying counseling has shifted dramatically from techniques to process. There is a good deal of agreement that the heart of the counseling process is the relationship which develops between counselor and client.[20]

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